

# Traffic Crashes:

An unintended consequence of war

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# LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH

“Motor Vehicle Accidents are a leading cause of death and disability in the US military population. “ Jan 2, 2015 study by the VA



# How prevalent is the problem

- In 2013 Washington Post Article, VA epidemiologist cited statistic that men serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have a 76% greater rate of dying in car crashes than the general public; female combat veterans have a 43% greater rate.
- There appears to be a “dose-responsive” relationship between deployment and increased risk (three deployments=36%; two deployments =27% and one deployment = 12% risk)

# How prevalent is the problem

- In Jan. 2012, The New York Times published an article citing research conducted by USAA. They found a 13% increase in accidents in which service members were at fault. The study also revealed that the riskiest time for accidents was 6 months after returning from deployment

# How prevalent is the problem

- VA Study in July 2010 found 56% of returning combat veterans reported readjustment issues ranging from dangerous driving to increased problems with alcohol and drug and anger issues.
- Army Study in 2009 found that among troops deployed: 23% had driven through stop-signs/red lights; 20% were anxious during usual driving; 50% were anxious when other cars approached quickly.



# Causes of Dangerous Driving in Combat Veterans

- Taught to drive aggressively in combat
  - TBI and PTSD symptoms
  - Medications
- Self Medication of symptoms

# Driving Aggressively

When training for convoys, troops are taught to drive aggressively. Driving simulators are used to teach troops how to drive in dangerous situations

Situations perceived as benign stateside, take on special significance overseas, like driving under overpasses, garbage on road, approaching slower vehicles.



# Post Combat Driving Survey

Army conducted a study in 2009 of behaviors that combat veterans reported engaging in when stateside

- ☐ Driving in the middle of the road
- ☐ Straddling lanes
- ☐ Chasing other drivers
- ☐ Driving through red lights and stop signs
- ☐ Being uncomfortable when car approaches quickly or boxes them in.

These behaviors have become automatic and linked to a sense of safety and control.

28 12 2003



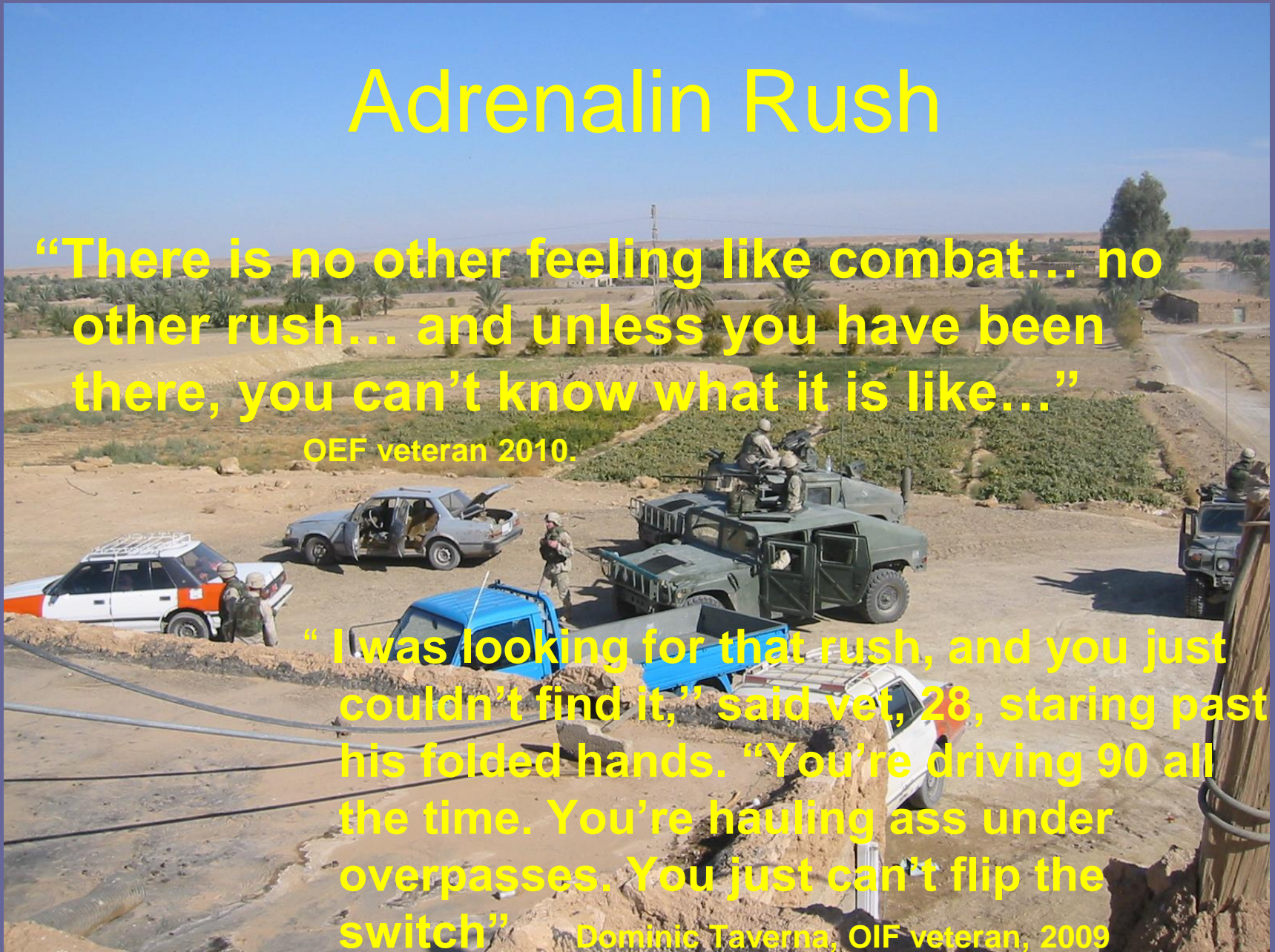
# Adrenalin Rush

“There is no other feeling like combat... no other rush... and unless you have been there, you can't know what it is like...”

OEF veteran 2010.

“I was looking for that rush, and you just couldn't find it,” said vet, 28, staring past his folded hands. “You're driving 90 all the time. You're hauling ass under overpasses. You just can't flip the switch”

Dominic Taverna, OIF veteran, 2009



# PTSD and Driving

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

According to the VA approximately 20% of those returning from combat will experience symptoms of PTSD.





# Symptoms of PTSD and effects on Driving

- ❖ Anger – road rage, being unable to a driving incident go.
- ❖ Nightmares – causing loss of sleep and fatigue
- ❖ Feeling invincible – not caring about living or dying; taking chances while driving
- ❖ Depression – effecting reactionary time in driving
- ❖ Increased vigilance – over-reacting to ordinary stimuli like car backfiring, car swerving, garbage on side of road

28 12 2003

# Traumatic Brain Injury and Driving

The Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) responsible for erratic driving overseas result in shockwaves which effect the brain.

TBI symptoms include problems with visual depth perception, auditory processing, ability to sustain period of attention, difficulty with scanning ability, reaction times are slowed, impaired executive decision making, judgment and problem solving.





# TBI and Driving

When individuals who have suffered from a TBI return home, they may feel like driving is a normal everyday activity, unaware of the changes that have physically taken place in their brain .

These changes make it much more difficult for the brain to take the information needed to operate a motor vehicle safely .

Most significant, judgment is impaired, making ordinary decisions, that much more difficult to execute. Other potentially problematic symptoms include dizziness, balance issues, memory problems and light sensitivities



# Medications

- ✓ Many medications prescribed to address mental health and physical issues from deployment effect ability to drive

These reactions may include:

- sleepiness
- blurred vision
- dizziness
- slowed movement
- fainting
- inability to focus or pay attention
- nausea



# Self Medication of Symptoms

- Many individuals returning are simply not ready for treatment

*52% of combat veterans have accessed the VA system at least once since discharge*

- Some individuals choose to address the issues themselves by self medicating

- Alcohol Abuse
- Drug Abuse

# Self Medication

- 5% of newly returning combat veterans accessing VA care acknowledge problem with alcohol abuse/dependency
- 4% of newly returning combat veterans accessing VA care acknowledge problem with drug abuse/dependency
- Appears to be a high correlation between PTSD symptoms and substance abuse (National Institute of Drug Abuse)
- According to a health survey released by the Pentagon in 2009, about 1 in 4 soldiers admit abusing prescription drugs – mostly painkillers – during a one-year period

# What is being done

## Safe Driving Initiative by VA, Department of Transportation and Department of Defense

- Goal to increase awareness of motor vehicle crashes among veterans
- Provide education regarding importance of safe driving, seatbelt and helmet usage and other safety measures

## Simulation Training

Taking simulation training used by the military to prepare service members for combat and using it for practicing driving skills at home. Also using simulation training with TBI patients

Increased awareness from mental health providers about driving issues.



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